

Play

by Ron Teachworth

Mila sat on a simple oak chair overlooking the courtyard as the sheer drapes lifted lightly in the breeze. From her second story dorm room she could see young girls walking to class in plain grey uniforms, set against a rich and lush landscape with a water fountain having the Virgin Mary at its center. At the far end of the courtyard, Mila could see a group of sophomore girls practicing their soccer techniques. Several worked on their dribble, while some exchanged headshots. As they juggled and passed the ball among themselves, Mila could almost see the invisible bond between them and the confidence they inspired in each other. It was something Mila admired. Their blue practice uniforms reminded her of a ball she and Jerome used to kick back and forth over what divided their backyards, a four-foot cyclone fence. The door to the small two- person dorm room opened and Rosalin entered.

“Have you had your meeting yet?”

“No, it's in ten minutes. I was just thinking and trying to relax.”

“Do you know who you're seeing?” asked Rose before taking off her sweater.

“The staff psychiatrist. Dr. Andrea Thomas, it says here.” Mila pointed to the yellow slip of paper. “Do you know her?”

“No, but I'm sure she'll be helpful. The people who work here are really good at what they do.”

Rosalin Guastella was a beautiful Italian girl from the east side of Detroit. Her parents wanted her to have a private school education and Sacred Heart had the best reputation in the city. Her family owned an Italian restaurant, so they could afford the tuition, room and board. Rose had long black hair that framed a Mediterranean complexion. Between that and her green eyes, she always turned heads. Her family said there were changes in Rose lately that caused them to send her to the new school, but her mother insisted it was her rebellious and adolescent behavior. Her introverted manner made it an easy match for Mila. They connected from their

first meeting, and Rose was really hoping Mila would be her new roommate.

The Sacred Heart Seminary was a conclave set behind tall brick walls that consumed an entire city block. Hamtramck was a Polish community within the city limits of Detroit that was predominately Roman Catholic. There were fourteen buildings in all, with a large gothic cathedral at its center. The multi-storied buildings housed a high school, a university for the preparation of priests, and a convent. The dorms, library, and dining areas were on the east side of campus. There were modest living quarters for the attending priests, including a small, but elegant house for the Bishop. He was responsible for the governing the large archdiocese of Detroit. The exterior wall was constructed of common brick columns crafted by Italian masons using a herringbone motif. The building windows were made of beveled panes set in leaded glass. Each of the buildings had an array of thickly varnished oak trim and exterior doors that were four inches thick.

Mila walked down the corridor towards the office and glanced out the windows at the men in blue uniforms pruning the hedges and trees. She listened to her footsteps and felt her stomach pushing upward as if she might vomit, but she fought it down. She hoped she was in a safe place. She entered the Doctor's office hesitantly and found a Nun sitting at a computer behind an office desk.

"You must be Mila. The Dr.'s waiting for you. You can go right in," said the young woman in a kind and pleasant way.

Mila opened the door into the inner sanctuary of Dr. Andrea Thomas who sat behind a large and ornate oak desk. She was busy finishing up a phone call. Mila sat down in the soft leather chair and tried to calm herself.

"You must be Mila. I'm Dr. Thomas. It's nice to meet you. How are you feeling?"

"My stomach feels a little shaky."

"Can I get you a glass of water?"

"No, thank you."

“Do you have any idea why we're meeting?” asked Dr. Thomas. She put on her glasses and opened a manila file folder and flipped through the pages.

Dr. Andrea Thomas was the consulting psychiatrist for the seminary and was contracted by the archdiocese to provide counseling and evaluations when needed. She worked mostly with young men entering the priesthood, an occasional high school student and, less often, a young woman who was being considered for the trial-model program for servitude. Mila had been admitted directly from her hospital stay and her file contained an admission sheet that had been signed by the Bishop.

“I know my mother, and probably my grandmother, brought me here directly from the hospital. They didn't want me to go home after... after the incident.”

“May I ask you some questions? If you're uncomfortable in answering, just say so.”

“Sure,” Mila said, tucking her hands under her legs. “I guess that's why I'm here.”

“It says here you're fifteen and in the tenth grade. Is that right?”

Mila nodded, and then said, “I saw a psychiatrist in the hospital and explained everything to him. Do I need to do that again?”

“I have your chart from Dr. Freiling here in my file, so I know what happened and why you were admitted to the hospital, but my job is to do some follow-up. Do you mind telling me what happened?”

Mila gazed out the window. Her sleep had been riddled with unpleasant dreams and flashbacks of the events leading up to her attempt at suicide. It was difficult for her to talk about what had happened. It brought everything back into her present consciousness, but she felt safe with Dr. Thomas, an attractive older woman with a kind and gentle voice. *This has to help*, Mila thought.

“Mila, do you want to tell me what happened?”

“My father started coming into my room at night after everyone was asleep. At first he would just talk to me. Then he tried touching me. He told me it was his responsibility to educate me about sex. It

was horrible and made me sick. I didn't know what to do. Eventually I tried to tell my mother, but she slapped me in the face and told me I was crazy to say something like that. So, before it got worse, I locked myself in the bathroom and ate some Tylenol...a lot...a whole bottle. I remember hearing the ambulance sirens outside and I could hear their voices. They pumped my stomach in the emergency room and made me drink something that tasted like charcoal. I was taken to the psychiatric floor and I think I was there for about a week."

Dr. Thomas took her time to respond. She poured herself a glass of water and dropped her glasses that were connected by an antique gold chain. Mila sat across from her desk with her face in her hands, wiping the moisture from her eyes.

"I am really sorry Mila. You're right, it is a horrible thing. It's unimaginable. Did this happen over a period of days, or weeks, or months?"

"About three weeks. Three or four times."

"And may I ask, did he touch you sexually?"

"Not at first. On the fourth visit, I was sleeping on the floor, between the bed and the wall. I guess I was trying to hide or protect myself. He would always put his finger to his lips and whisper...shh...shh. He tried to touch my breasts, but I pulled away and made some noise. He left, but I knew he would come back, so I took the Tylenol before it got worse, as an escape, I guess. I didn't know what else to do."

Dr. Thomas got up and walked over to the large vertical windows that looked out over the campus. The sun was low and the warm light cast shadows across the lawns and walkways. Finally she said,

"Thank God you weren't physically assaulted. I am so sorry, Mila. We don't really know what causes a parent to treat their child this way, but it is a pathological illness. It's rare, but it does happen." She paused again before continuing. "I think this is enough discussion for today. Please know you're safe here, and we will meet many times over the course of your stay with us. Try and get good sleep, exercise, and make a friend or two. Let me ask you Mila, do you feel safe here?"

"I am staying in a dorm room with a very nice girl. We seemed to have a lot in common, so yes, I feel safe. I think at some level, my mother brought me here to protect me, to make this all go away. She said she wants me to become a nun, and my grandparents are personal friends with the Bishop, so they want to place me in a special program, but..."

"Do you want to become a Nun?"

"I don't think so. I just want to be normal and go to school, like a normal kid. Friends, school, sports, boys...you know...all that stuff."

"That sounds good. Let's meet again tomorrow, OK? Same time, same place. Thank you Mila, for sharing this with me. I know this must be hard. God Bless you."

Mila got up from her comfortable chair and extended her hand to the doctor, but Dr. Thomas pulled her close and gave her a hug. By now sunlight was streaming into the dark oak office and caught the edge of a cut glass figure on the desk top sending bits of light to the wall and ceiling. Mila closed the door behind her and said goodbye to the Nun while she sat working at her computer. Within five minutes after Mila's exit, Dr. Thomas opened her office door.

"Get me the parish attorney on the phone, will you Ellen?"

Mila remembered she was to stop by the principal's office and talk more about school and her stay. The terrazzo floor was polished, the lighting was subdued, and rich oil paintings of the saints adorned the office walls. The principal's office was a busy place with students coming and going. Mila filled out a request card and took a seat. It was nearly an hour before the secretary called her name. The secretary escorted her down a small hallway to an office at the end.

"Come in and sit down," said Mother Angelica, an older heavy-set Nun dressed in the black and white habit. "You've seen Dr. Thomas, I take it?"

Mila avoided eye contact at first, not knowing what to expect. *What a contrast*, she thought. The office was utilitarian and plain. The tile floor was pristine clean. Mother Angelica sat behind a steel desk and the only decoration was a crucifix on the wall behind her. "Yes ma'am, I just came from her office."

"I see. Your grandmother has requested that you be placed in a trial model program at the tenth grade level here at our high school, and that you be considered for the convent. Did you know that?"

"Not exactly. I wasn't sure what had been arranged."

"Apparently your grandparents are friends with Bishop Sylvester and they made the request through his office. You will finish out the school year as a tenth grade student. During this time you will continue to see Dr. Thomas on a regular basis and I have assigned Sister Maria to be your counselor. She will help you acclimate to your classes and become better acquainted with our rules and procedures. Do you have any questions?"

"No...well, do I have to become a Nun? And when will I see my family?"

"Don't worry about becoming a Nun. There's plenty of time to sort that out. You're a little too young to be making that decision. I expect that is something your grandmother invented. We'll let her believe whatever she wants. Mother Angelica noticed the expression on the girl's face.

"I know you've been through a lot, Mila, but you're safe here. Please feel free to see me whenever you want."

There was a soft knock at the door and Sister Maria came in and introduced herself.

The phone rang on Dr. Thomas's desk, signaling that her secretary had reached the attorney on the phone.

"Hello, Ralph. How are you?"

"Busy. Just got back from court, a custody case. What can I do for you?"

"I'm working with a young girl, just fifteen and her father made sexual advances towards her. According to the girl, and as far as I know, there was no sexual assault, but she made a serious attempt to take her life. She has been enrolled here at the school, probably for her protection. I just saw her for the first time this afternoon. Do I need to file a report with the authorities?"

"In this state, under code section 722, mandatory reporting is required. Failure to report is a misdemeanor punishable by 100 days in jail, and a five hundred dollar fine. So the answer is a big yes. The judge will have power over testimony if prosecution is sought. In other words, he will determine what evidence will be allowed. You should file a 1033-3 short form report with the State Family Independence Agency, and they will investigate. It's a CYA deal."

"Will they need to question her?"

"That's up to the prosecutor, but you might want to make a recommendation. And you can hold off for a while, say a week, and then file your report. Does that help?"

"Yes, I think so. I just don't want anyone questioning her right now, or even mentioning charges, or court proceedings."

"Sometimes, if they visit the home and do an interview, it can put the fear of God in the father. End of story."

"Thanks Ralph. If I have any questions I'll give you a call. Have a good one."

Sister Maria gave Mila an hour-long tour of the campus and all the buildings. She stopped by the laundry, fitted her with her uniform, and gave her a handbook before sending her back to the dorm. Mila found Rose lying on her bed reading her English homework.

"How did it go?" asked Rose.

"It went well. Everyone has been so nice. What are you reading?"

"Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, for my American Lit class. Will you be staying?"

"I think so, at least for the rest of the year." Mila lay back on her bed, her arms crossed under head. "What's it like here?" asked Mila.

"Technically it's coed, but the classes are segregated, you know, all girls together in classes, and all boys together in their classes. Everyone has a religious studies class, usually first period, and the teachers are a mix of Nuns and regular teachers. Like my History class, Mr. Rodriguez has been here forever and Math is taught by Mrs. Poterek. The rest are pretty much Nuns that live in the convent. I think you'll like it and the kids are really nice for the most part. Some of the freshman boys are immature and a little goofy, but watch out for senior boys. Some of them are too hot to handle. Woo Hoo! Do you have your schedule?"

"Yeah. Sister Maria is my counselor and she gave me this." Mila handed Rose a computer-generated form. "What do you think?"

Rose scanned the sheet. "You're in my History class third hour, we both have Religious studies first period and we have American Literature last period. So we've got three out of six classes together."

Mila smiled and felt more relaxed. That would make getting used to the school easier.

Mila slipped into the school routine easily with the help of Rosalin and Sister Maria. She became especially fond of Dr. Thomas and always looked forward to her appointments right after school. Sometimes the sessions were difficult. She sat in her office one afternoon as Dr. Thomas looked over Mila's hospital chart again.

Finally the Dr. looked up and asked, "Have you thought much about your father since you left the hospital?"

"I think about why he did what he did, why he would want to abuse me. I wonder if he loved me."

"Men that do such things are extremely confused. Some would say they have an illness. It could have had something to do

with his childhood or his culture. He may have been abused when he was young. There is something we call cross transference, which is an unconscious redirection of feelings from one person to another. He might have a dysfunctional relationship with your mother. There are many factors."

"Is there treatment?"

"Treatment is needed for you. That's where I come in. You need to acknowledge these recent events, learn how to grieve your loss, and regain trust, not just in your father, but in all people." Dr. Thomas paused and placed the folder back into her desk.

"What will happen to my father?"

"For one thing, what he did is criminal. He may be interviewed and face prosecution. We will have to wait and see what the authorities decide. There also could be co-existing problems, like substance abuse or even a psychiatric disorder."

Dr. Thomas started to realize Mila was a very solid and resilient girl. She sought out her new roommate for support, and had managed to avoid abusive physical contact with her father. Mila seemed to draw on her spirituality and realize there is a healing process. Their discussion carried on longer than the usual forty-five minutes until Dr. Thomas finally said, "Mila, our time is up. I think this has been good, and I would like to give you an assignment: next time we meet, talk to me about something pleasurable."

The dorm cafeteria was a sea of students at dinner because of some guests visiting from Poland. Mila searched for Rose and finally spotted her in the long dinner line. When she got her attention, she motioned with hand signals that she wanted to make sure they sat together. Rose saved her a spot, as Mila made her way down the crowded aisle.

"How are you doing?"

"Other than a snap quiz in math, I'm good. What's up?"

"I had a pretty intense session with Dr. Thomas."

Rose frowned. "Your father?"

Mila nodded. "For next time she asked me to prepare to talk about something good, something that makes me happy."

“You mean like your best roomie?” Rose said with a goofy grin on her face.

“Don't laugh,” Mila said. “I did suggest you, but Dr. Thomas said it should be something before I came here.”

“Like what?”

Mila looked at her plate and shoved chunks of potato around with her fork. “Did I ever tell you about my friend Jerome?”

“Ooooooh. Boyfriend action. Do tell.”

Mila blushed. “He's just a friend from since I was, like, nine years-old. We started first playing by accident. His ball came into my yard, and I was out playing in the dirt. I had created a few houses and a wooden block for a car. He pulled a piece of gum out of his pocket and offered me some and then he stayed and asked me if he could play. He built this cool bridge out of sticks and cardboard. One thing led to another.”

“How cool. I just played dolls with my sister. Ever heard of Barbie? And Ken, what a dork.” Rose rolled her eyes. “But seriously, sounds like this Jerome character would be the perfect thing to talk about.”

Mila knew Rose was right. It would be easy and even fun to talk about Jerome.

The next day was a blur and although Mila tried hard to concentrate in class, she was preoccupied with thoughts about her after school session with Dr. Thomas. She arrived a few minutes early and had to wait until finally the door opened and the doctor stuck her head around the door jam.

“Come in, Mila. Have you thought about your assignment?” Mila was much more herself now and had spent time thinking about what she was going to say. “I want to tell you about Jerome.”

“Well, you had mentioned him before. He's your neighbor, right?”

“Yeah, Jerome lives right behind our house and we jump the fence to visit with each other. We usually play together in the yard, or in the dirt.”

“Really. Tell me about it.”

“Jerome and I like to create and build these towns, cities, or farm communities that we make up, I guess. We build roads, bridges, buildings, farms, sometimes rivers, and imagine people who live there. We collect stones, sticks, bricks, and logs. Jerome has some small cars and trucks that he collects and we use, but we create different voices for different characters. I am always the female characters, and he plays the parts for the men. Each character has a different voice. We play for hours. Sometimes we get totally lost in play and forget about dinner and my mother has to call me home. Our subdivision is made up of small track homes that are divided by a cyclone fence. Many families didn't get around to putting grass in the backyard, leaving it dirt, sand, and gravel. So we use each other's backyard as mini universes. We gave them names. Jerome's yard was Prairie Hills and my yard is called Green Acres, because there is some grass growing wild. It's hard to describe how much fun it is.”

Dr. Thomas sat listening intently and then asked. “How long have you been playing together?”

“We first started playing when Jerome was seven, shortly after his family moved in, and I was nine years old. We had other kinds of play, sometimes word games, pick-up sticks, and catch over the fence with an old blue rubber ball. One time we played catch over the fence with water balloons. Occasionally we would just ride our bikes, but when we did, Jerome would always make it a made-up adventure. Our bikes became police motorcycles. I think we started playing together because we were the only two kids in the neighborhood around the same age. He can make me laugh so hard, I can't stop.”

“Would you also see him on your school bus?”

“That's kind of a funny thing. It's like we had our own private world. We might say hi, but we didn't sit together or talk on the bus, or at school. Some of Jerome's boyfriends would tease him because he still liked to play in the dirt. They didn't know about our secret play and me. And as we got older, we had to hide the play even more, until finally things changed. Now and then we would talk

about play, but he is busy playing in the band, and I was staying after school for girls sports. We still keep our friendship quiet, and almost a secret. Our families know, I guess. What do you think?"

"It's very interesting. Play is such a very important part of development. I think you're lucky to find a friend to play with. It's a coping mechanism, meaning it takes your mind off things that are bothering you." They continued to talk about the importance of play in childrens' lives and about Jerome until the end of the session.

Finally, Dr. Thomas said, "I'm glad you told me about this, Mila."

As Mila headed back to her room, she felt lighter than she had in weeks. She couldn't help wondering about Jerome, where he was and what he was doing.

Mila's relationship with Rosalin grew stronger each day. She soon learned that Rose was diagnosed with a learning disability that she compensated for with innate intelligence. She was especially talented with numbers and she excelled in math and science. Mila's abilities were the flip side of Rose's, and they were constantly helping each other in their strengths. One late night after lights out, they lay in bed exchanging stories. Mila had just finished talking about one of her play sessions with Jerome, when Rose decided to divulge a secret.

"There is something I have never told anyone, but I've wanted to, so here it is. Last summer I was hanging out with friends one evening. It was getting late, and the sky was pitch black. We were sitting on my friend Karen's porch and we suddenly saw a massive object in the sky. It was lit up and moved slowly, low to the horizon, and then it slowed down and hovered. I guess it was what they call a UFO. It was a strange experience. We walked over to her back fence and looked up at an oval shaped object. There was this tone—we all heard it—then without notice it moved away toward the horizon and out of site.

Mila sat up in bed staring through the dark at Rose. "Whoa, that's completely bizarre."

"I know. We kept double checking with each other to make sure we hadn't lost our marbles, you know? Did that really happen?"

"Did any of you tell your parents or contact the police?"

"My friend did, and get this...there were other police reports."

"And you think it affected your thinking?"

Rose paused, then said, "Maybe it had something to do with the tone."

Mila threw off her covers and sat on the edge of the bed. "Tone? What did it sound like?"

"It sounded like a low pitched sewing machine that started and stopped. It only lasted about thirty seconds. That was it."

"Did it scare you?"

"That was the weirdest part of all. It didn't really scare us. We all just accepted it and only talked about it occasionally with each other. Now we just try to forget about it."

"That would be pretty hard to do. I mean, that's a big deal."

"You have no idea. Because something more than just seeing this thing had an effect on us that night. It was then I started to have a talent with numbers, because before the event, I was average at math. Now I'm working with advanced calculus problems." Rose hesitated, chewing on her lower lip.

"What?" Mila asked.

"Mila, you can't tell anyone!"

"Not even my little green friends?"

Rose chucked a pillow at Mila. "Seriously," she said. "Not anyone."

Mila wiped the smile from her face. "Don't worry, I won't say a thing, but Rose, I hope you're all right. Having an encounter is one thing, but leaving its effect on you? That's creepy. You might want to make an appointment to see Dr. Thomas. She's extremely cool."

Mila's schedule was jam packed with her classes and a meeting with Sister Maria. Fortunately her meetings with Dr. Thomas had been recently reduced to weekly sessions instead of bi-weekly as they had been before. She stopped by the student center to check her mail and found a message in her mail box that indicated her mother was visiting after Mass this coming Sunday. She had decided she would ask her mom for Jerome's address. She made her way to Dr. Thomas's waiting room and sat down, thinking about what she would say in her letter to Jerome. Dr. Thomas walked in minutes later.

"Hello, Mila." Dr. Thomas pulled Mila's chart and leafed through her file, then pulled out some notes. Let's see, where did we leave off?"

"I think I told you about Jerome. Do you find it odd that I have a friend who is a boy?"

"Usually, during these years, our friendships are with our peers. Girls play with girls, and boys play with boys. They find familiarity and security with each other, but the most important issue is that children need to play. The more play, the better."

"Why?"

"There was a child psychologist, Jean Piaget, who explored how children think and reason. He described two kinds of play: fantasy and imitative. Both forms help develop imagination and intelligence. See? It's a good thing."

"Jerome always came to play with ideas. It was like he was already thinking about it before we started. I loved his ideas. It caused me to think about it as well. We did variations on a theme and there was always a goal. Sometimes it was to grow and deliver the crops to needed families that were hit by a tornado. When he brought a bag of military toys, I knew it was going to be a battle. I think we had the most fun when we made up things from simple objects, like sticks and stones. Jerome had a collection of sticks, all different sizes, lengths, colors, and shapes. I collected stones and objects, like marbles, matchboxes, and pieces of string. It just went

on and on, and on. Jerome promised me we would always play and be friends.”

Dr. Thomas stopped taking notes and looked at Mila. “You're really fortunate you had that experience. How long did it last?”

“It started to slow down and become less frequent when we got into Middle School. Jerome had a special bell that he would ring from time to time. We called it the play bell. When I heard the bell sound, I could expect Jerome at the back door. Sometimes we just talked, but we always ended up playing in some way. As we got older the play changed. We moved out of the yard, and into our kitchens. We started playing with paper and pencil. Jerome taught me Chess. We learned word games, number games, and occasionally board games, but they weren't quite as much fun as our own made-up games.”

Since it was her assistant's day off, Dr. Thomas picked up a call that rang through then placed her hand over the phone. “Listen, Mila, I have to take this. We'll have to cut this a little short today. Thanks for all the discussion. It's been really interesting. I'll see you next week.”

The spring day was unusually warm, and all the trees and plants on campus were sprouting new buds. The water fountain had been turned on and hundreds of Crocus surrounded the monument to Mother Mary. Mila walked quickly after Mass to the welcoming center and saw her mother sitting comfortably in the lounge, as she had done several times before.

“Hi mom, how are you? Sorry I'm a little late. Mass ran over.”

“That's ok, I haven't been here long. How are you?”

“Good. How are Anton and dad?”

“Your father left to visit his mother. You remember she lives in the Ukraine. He may be gone for a quite a while. He told me, before he left that he did something wrong, but he didn't say what it was. I assume he was talking about you. I am not sure he will return. I am

really sorry Mila, for not recognizing what was happening you. It's my fault. I am so sorry."

Mila sat on the oak bench and there was an uncomfortable silence. She searched for words that might help her mother. Finally she spoke.

"Look, you didn't cause this. If there is any blame, it's on him. We need to support each other, stay strong, and plot out a future. There will be a lot to think about, like our livelihood. What will we do without his support?"

Her mother used a tissue to wipe her eyes, then said.

"I have started working at the post office. It's just part time, but it could develop into a full time job, and your grandparents are helping us. Your brother has a part time job. I think we will be fine. Is there anything you need?"

"Yes. Could you send me Jerome's address?"

"Mila, I think they moved. I saw a For Rent sign in front of their house, and there hasn't been anyone around for a couple of weeks. I can check."

Mila tried hard to disguise her feelings. Her mother had no idea what this would mean to her. She tried to stay focused on their conversation.

"Well, send me the address anyway. Maybe they will have their mail forwarded. OK? I have a lot of homework and I have to go. Thanks for coming by."

"Would you like to come home for a weekend sometime? I think it would be fine now."

"I think I will, maybe after my midterms. I'll ask Mother Angelica." Mila gave her mother a hug and a kiss, "Love you, Mom."

As she made her way back to the dorm, anxiety swept over her. *Jerome, where did you go?*

Mila picked up her pace to nearly a jog until she reached the dorm entrance. *Rose must be back by now*, she thought. She pulled hard on the banister and took two steps with one jump and

proceeded up the stairway in a rush to find her roommate. She needed to talk with Rose. She was the only one who would understand.

She opened the door and started to speak but the room was empty and Rose's bed was stripped of its linens. Mila sat on her bed disappointed. Her mind was preoccupied with thoughts of Jerome neatly packing his clothes in his suitcase and organizing his toys into a special box, wrapping his sticks with small labels identifying their meaning. Something crinkled under her leg. It was a small piece of yellow folded paper. "I am doing laundry. Rose". *Of course*, Mila thought, and sprinted out the door heading for the laundry facility in the basement.

She found Rose reading a recent gossip magazine from the collection that adorned the folding table.

"There you are. Thanks for the note!"

"Hey. Did you see your mom?"

"She told me Jerome and his family have moved. I have no idea where he is. I can't believe it." Mila's chin quivered as she wiped tears from the corners of her eyes and looked at Rose with an expression that said, *Can you help me?*

Rose gave Mila a gentle hug. Mila dropped her head on Rose's shoulder and cried softly, releasing the tension and frustration that had built up inside her.

"I'm so sorry, Mila. But don't worry. You'll find him."

"Yeah...well, we'll see. My mother invited me to come home. She told me my father left to visit his mother in Russia, and I got the impression he's not coming back. So I think I will go home for a visit next weekend after midterms."

Mila helped Rose fold her laundry. The busywork distracted her and helped her relax. As they gathered up the clothing and placed everything back into the plastic bin, Mila said, "I had a disturbing dream last night. I was in the backyard, playing with Jerome and my father came out of the house yelling at me. He grabbed me by the hair and started pulling me towards the back door. Jerome picked up a large stone and threw it at my father, knocking him unconscious.

We just ignored him and as he lay there, we returned to our play as if nothing had happened.”

“Dream interpretation is beyond my skill level. You might want to run that past Dr. Thomas.”

With midterms and the routine of the school week behind her, Mila stood at the Welcome Center door waiting for her mother to pick her up. This would be the first time she had gone home since her suicide attempt. Dr. Thomas had given her some advice as to how to proceed once she reached the house. She had told her to take her time getting reacquainted with the house, to focus on people not things, and avoid anything that might bring back thoughts of her father's behavior.

Her older brother, Anton, was out with friends when she arrived and she found the house much the same. Her mother had rearranged the furniture in her bedroom and put a vase of fresh flowers on her dresser. She had mentioned perhaps going into town, doing some shopping, and catching a movie. Mila agreed, but asked for some time alone. She walked out the back door, wandered over to where she used to play and knelt down in Green Acres. Several hard rainstorms had erased the roads and towns that once thrived there.

She sifted through the dirt, looking for remnants of past adventures. She glanced over the back fence into the familiar backyard and she could barely make out Prairie Hills.

Within seconds she was up and over the fence. Making her way to Prairie Hills she saw an old stone fence and the remains of a bridge made of sticks. She sat down and touched the ground, moving both palms across the gravel. For more than ten minutes she just sat in the dirt, trying to imagine Jerome was there once again. *Jerome, where are you?* she wondered for the hundredth time.

She spotted a small tire half exposed in the dirt. It was something. She gently nudged the tire from the soil and brushed it clean. It had come off one of Jerome's trucks. It was symbolic. She remained at

the center of Prairie Hills, grasping the small toy tire in her palm, imagining Jerome and her playing. In her mind, the scene played over and over, until she heard the familiar call from her mother. "Mila..."

Sunday afternoon came quickly, and Mila found herself being dropped off after a nostalgic visit home. Rose had now become her best friend and confidant. Still, she couldn't wait to see Rose and tell her everything. She pushed the dorm room door open with her small suitcase. Rose looked up from the homework she was poring over and her eyes brightened at the sight of her friend.

"How was your weekend?" Rose asked.

"Other than the flying saucers in my backyard, it was the usual."

"Very funny!" Rose closed the door behind her and whispered. "This morning I was working on my calculus homework, and I had no idea what I was doing. I didn't even understand the problem. Blank, blank and more blank. I think the force left and took his calculator with him.

"Now you don't have to worry about being possessed by a little green alien force, right?"

Rose shrugged. "Easy come, easy go."

Mila laughed. Then, Rose came close, noticing a new necklace around Mila's neck. It was a silver chain attached to a small black circular object.

"Wow, what is that?"

"I found it in Jerome's yard. I already had this chain, so I glued a very small loop into the little tire and presto. I love it. It's helping me, a little."

The spring days grew warmer and there were lectures, tests, performances and an occasional mixer. Sessions with Dr. Thomas grew farther and farther apart. After Rose's transfer into basic math,

they both found themselves on the honor roll which made their families happy. Mila and Rose were asked to help at the senior graduation ceremony and within days they were packing to go home for the summer. Mila made sure she had one last meeting with Dr. Thomas.

“Well, Mila, you have come a long way since you first walked in my door. Don't you think? I mean look at you. Your face glows and you seem so happy. Are you looking forward to going home for the summer?”

“In some ways, I am. I really like a lot of people here, and if it weren't for you, I don't know what would have happened. Thank you so much. I feel like you saved my life.”

“Mila, you've helped yourself. Did you ever get a chance to see Jerome?”

Mila's expression immediately changed.

“No, I haven't seen him. He moved away, but when I get home I am going to try to find him.” Mila paused and looked down at her lap, feeling suddenly awkward. “Dr. Thomas, I hope I'll see you next year. My grandparents have arranged for my return, and Rose I want to room together again. I hope you have a good summer.”

After a long hug, Dr. Thomas watched Mila leave the office. *I am sure she will be all right*, she thought.

During those last few days, and after intimate discussions that lasted long into the night, Rose and Mila exchanged phone numbers and made promises to see each other over the summer. Rose even said she would help with Mila's mission to find Jerome. There were station wagons, trucks, and cars pulling trailers that last day, and it seemed many students were crying and laughing at the same time. Eventually the parking lot emptied and everyone went their separate ways. The halls were quiet, and everyone started what hoped to be a good and restful summer vacation.

It wasn't long before Mila was home and had enlisted her brother to help her canvas the neighborhood. After asking every neighbor on the block, they determined that Jerome's father had been reassigned to a different work place, but no one knew where. Mila's letters all

came back 'return to sender'. She looked in multiple telephone directories, and even stopped the postman one day. He knew nothing. The house behind her was eventually rented to a young married couple who quickly planted yards of thick grass in the backyard. Prairie Hills was transformed into a huge vegetable garden and each time Mila approached the back fence there was a large and angry dog barking in her face. Everything had changed, and Mila was left with her memories and a small necklace.

The summer was nearly over and Mila had taken every class and activity that was offered by the department of recreation. She played summer soccer, worked on getting her Red Cross Life Saving certification, and read the complete collection of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels. Her mother kept her busy with household chores. Her favorite was the weekly laundry; it reminded her of doing laundry with Rose in the dorm basement.

She pushed open the back door with a large load of linens which she hung carefully on the line. Without a cloud in the sky, the warm breeze made the sheets billow like sails. Mila thought she heard the sound of the playbell. It was very faint, but she was certain she heard it. Or was it just wishful thinking? Had all the searching come to an end? The sound faded and her heart sank. She bent to pick up the laundry basket and saw the blue ball roll gently to a stop against the toe of her shoe. She remembered his promise. *Could it be?*

Play is part of a collection of short stories: *Beyond*. The collection will be published by 2013.

Synopsis: *Beyond's* Young Adult short stories cross cultures and take place in settings from North America to Europe. A metaphysical / religious motif binds the collection, and stories are set in times dating back to 1932—when swing dancing was the rage—to a recent state science competition in New Mexico. “*Play*” deals with a girl's attempt to mitigate her feelings about violence in the home; in “*Callanish Stones*”, a young boy is found on a remote beach in Scotland, barely alive; “*Finding Edith Allen*” centers on a young

woman in search of her birth mother; and "Mont. St. Michel" tells the story of a child raised by a Bishop in France. The stories mix male and female protagonists with families and friends, often in school or religious settings.

Ron Teachworth

<http://www.ronteachworthliterary.com>

<http://www.publishersmarketplace.com/members/ronaldst/>

